

Painting + Idea = Painting / Idea + Painting = Conceptual Painting Andrew Bracey

“INSPECTOR DENIS: You don’t fool me. No one can paint ideas:
 No work of art has ever pictured thought. (...)”¹
 Art & Language

In 1839 Paul Delaroche made his famous remark, *from today painting is dead*, apparently in response to seeing a daguerreotype for the first time. There has since been a protracted death of painting debate (one that surely everyone is now bored by) and painting has accelerated the pace of re-inventing itself and consuming other medias. Since the birth of conceptual art and the re-assessment of Duchamp’s significance in the 1960’s, the idea has become the central focus for the creation and debate of art. Ed Rusha has said that “The idea of facing a blank canvas and not knowing what you were going to do – and *intriguing* yourself into the canvas – didn’t really appeal to me, and I began to see the only way to do things was to have a preconceived idea.”² Many contemporary artists, in and after this period, have adopted a conceptual (art) approach to painting.

This essay will look at examples of conceptual paintings and will question if there can be such a thing as a conceptual painter. This has been born out of comments made in relation to my own work and from a realisation that I do not talk about the act of painting with my peers, only the ideas driving the work. I approach each series of painting with a methodology that will best translate the idea, resulting in a lack of a consistent signature style.

As an art student in Liverpool, I would often visit the Walker Art Gallery. The John Moores painting prize opened just after I arrived and many hours were spent contemplating and thinking about the paintings in the show. The winner that year was Dan Hays, for his painting *Harmony in Green*. At the time I found the painting to be somewhat cold and conceptual, driven by the idea as opposed by a love of painting³ On the video playing in the gallery, Hays discussed his work and I could not get over how everything had been pre-ordered and planned before the execution. Where was the surprise and joy in painting, I asked both my tutors and myself, if it was already so pre-conceived?

One only has to turn to Sol LeWitt’s number eight of his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* to see that there is a problem with the notion of a conceptual painter. “When words

¹ Art & language, 1984, Victorine: Libretto for an Opera in T. R. Myers, 2011, *Painting*, London, Whitechapel, p.46.

² Rusha, E. & Miller, H., 2007, Interview in H. Miller, 2007, *International Lonely Guy*, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, p.28.

³ I was a young and naïve art student and had completely changed my mind by the third year!

such as painting and sculpture are used, they connote a whole tradition and imply a consequent acceptance of this tradition, thus placing limitations on the artist who would be reluctant to make art that goes beyond the limitations.”⁴ LeWitt astutely states that if an artist sticks to a single medium, then they are being restrictive with the best way of turning their ideas into artworks. However one only has to look at On Kawara’s ongoing series *Date Paintings*, for example, to see that painting can be a channel for successful conceptual art. Pavel Büchler, Anikam Toren and Ben Cook are three contemporary artists whose work is derived from the legacy of conceptual art, and who use painting in this trajectory.

Pavel Büchler’s *Modern Paintings* are excellent examples of conceptual paintings, seen clearly in his process of conceiving and creating the paintings. Büchler starts, not with the stretching and priming of canvas, but with rooting through skips and vacated post-degree art college studios to find abandoned paintings. “They have to be failed paintings and also modern paintings, not Monarch of the Glenn type, but more the evening school amateur attempting Cezanne”⁵. After this a set of rules and strategies are followed to construct an alternative daily practice of painting. Most charmingly is that each day work would take place on the paintings and stop completely for the day only when the phone rang. More practically, in terms of rules for the painting’s creation, was the addition of layer upon layer of acrylic primer to the oil paint surface, at once obliterating the original painting. After a period of weeks all the primer (along with fragments of paint) are pulled off the canvas in clumps, before being reapplied to the canvas surface back to front with the acrylic primer towards the canvas. This creates an odd and surprising painting, one both lapsing in control (of the specificity of the final composition) and being highly ordered (in the process).

Büchler uses painting as the best medium for this specific body of work. As Joan Key has said, “This is not because, as a painter, he questions the forms or institutions of painting; these are accepted because they are integral to the discursive intentions of his work. Rather, as a producer whose artistic practice has developed through other generic forms, he uses conception of painting’s ideal form in order to disclose that paintings, like other objects, may be much used and often destroyed.”⁶ One can see a parallel between this work and Asger Jorn’s *Detoured paintings* of the mid 20th century. Jorn felt that “All works of art are objects and should be treated as such, but these objects are not ends in themselves: they are tools with which to influence

⁴ LeWitt, S. 1969, Sentences on Conceptual Art, in A. Alberro & B. Stimson, 2000, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Massachusetts, MIT press, p. 106.

⁵ Conversation with Büchler, P., 18/11/2011, Suite studios, Manchester. Somewhat oddly the day I spoke to him was the day after he completed the final painting in the series.

⁶ Key, J., 2007, Painting as Praxis. In: E. S. Oktern, 2007, *Pavel Büchler – Absentmindedwindowgazing*, Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, p. 121

spectators.”⁷ What we see as viewer are both lost, and found, paintings, the failed paintings are re-used and re-valued by Büchler’s conceptual approach. Most surprisingly though is that, in the flesh, they are truly engaging as paintings.

Büchler uses paintings as a continuum in the (assisted) readymade, as much as painting, lineage. All Büchler’s work is aligned to Douglas Huebler’s assertion that, “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more”⁸. The use of existing paintings does not technically add any further objects to the world. However I would assert that he goes further to create something extraordinary, with something left behind, thrown away and given up as failure.

Anikam Toren, in his series, *Armchair Painting*, similarly plucks discarded paintings from charity and second-hand shops. Into each painting he incises a sublime, potent slogan-like statement. A curious juxtaposition occurs as two contexts are thrown together to create meaning. A consistent trait of Toren’s practice is to bring something from everyday life to the point of destruction before resuscitating the material into something more meaningful by a transformative process. Newspapers, chairs and teapots have all been used as alchemical materials for artworks. His *Pidgin Paintings* unpick the constituents of painting itself. Holes are cut into a prepared canvas to provide material to be shredded and used as a paint that is worked over the remaining canvas. “If Fontana were still to challenge that the act of destruction leads to a new and relevant beauty, so Toren can reject such thoughts and maintain that he has created nothing more than one of the purest examples of art out of art.”⁹ Toren’s work is conceptually pure, where idea, process and outcome are perfectly contained, more often than not in the form of paintings.

Ben Cook similarly uses a readymade surface for his paintings, albeit one that creates a strong relationship with the color-field and abstract expressionist paintings that conceptual art sought to break away from. In his *Found Paintings* blemished and rejected printed cloth is plucked from machines and re-presented (albeit with the addition of the stretcher) into the gallery context. Cook sees himself foremost as a painter and maintains that “ They are found objects, but they are not ready-mades in a true Ducampian sense. They’re not things that I have just taken from one place and put in a gallery. I’ve actually had some authorship, some role in re-shaping them, stretching them and re-presenting them as paintings.”¹⁰ Cook comes from a position of having a sense of mourning or guilt towards his medium,

⁷ Jorn, A, 1941, Detoured Paintings, in C. Harrison & P. Wood, 2002, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, p. 707.

⁸ Huebler, D, 1968, Untitled Statements In K. Stiles P. H. Selz, 1996, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of artist’s writings*, California, University Of California Press, p. 212.

⁹ Blasé, C., 1991, The picture is *not* the picture In: E. A. Macgregor, 1991, *Anikam Toren*, Birmingham, Ikon and Bristol, Arnolfini, p. 8.

¹⁰ Milne, J., 2000, Interview with Ben Cook in: E. Anderson, 2004, *Ben Cook: Found Paintings*, Salford, The Lowry Press, p. 7.

but he is also an example of how a painter can respond to the age of mechanical (digital) reproduction and to conceptual art's dominant legacy in contemporary art.

The examples cited above show a clear trajectory of idea through the medium of paint; Art & Language's Inspector Denis has been fooled, you can paint ideas! However can such a thing as a conceptual painter truly exist or is this a form of paradox? Gerhard Richter has recently stated that, "My pronouncements about my lack of style and lack of opinion were partly polemics against contemporary trends I disliked. Or they were self protective claims to create a climate for myself in which I would paint what I want."¹¹ A painter, no matter how driven by concept and idea will also be at least equally driven by (the activity of) painting itself. The idea, here, is driven by the medium and so cannot be truly conceptual art, as the idea should always take precedent over their medium. The artists cited above produce paintings as part of a wider practice, one that uses painting as the best way of realising their idea for a particular work. All three do not pick up a paintbrush or use paint out of a tube in the works cited; their work can be considered as conceptual painting, partly because it is removed directly from the painting process.

It could be argued that contemporary painters as varied as Bernard Frize, Natasha Kidd, Luc Tuymans, Tomma Abts and Gerhard Richter have absorbed conceptual art's strategies to continue painting's evolution. Frize follows recipes to produce his abstract paintings; Kidd replaces her hand with carefully constructed machines that endlessly repeat a process or gesture; Tuymans paints all his politically charged paintings in a single day; Abts always uses the same 19 X 15 inch sized canvases and, well, Richter is Richter. Each employ strategy and rules in a manner that is uncannily similar to that of Büchler, Toren and Cook. However these artists are equally all linked to the history of painting, and, to paraphrase LeWitt, are unwilling to go beyond the limitations of the discipline. Returning to Hays, he recently told me that *Harmony in Green* was the painting that meant the most to him. This was not only because of career significance, but also because it was such an emotional painting for him, both as an artistic creation and for a point in his life. This was interesting, as what might be construed as a painting that was conceptually driven by myself as the audience was talked about in somewhat 'old fashioned' painterly terminology by the artist himself.

Maybe a painter would be hard pressed to give up paint simply because the idea logically requires a different medium. Or maybe, as Jonathan Griffin has written about Richard Aldrich, "When people talk about 'conceptual painting' they often mistakenly assume that such an approach strives to reduce painting to the illustration of ideas in paint. What they fail to grasp is that conceptual painting is

¹¹ Mehring, C., 2011, East or West, Home is Best: Friends, Family and Design In Richter's Early Years, in: M. Godfrey and N. Serota, 2011, *Gerhard Richter – Panorama*, London, Tate, p. 30.

itself a mischievous paradox; all painting is to a greater or lesser extent conceptual."¹²

Painting is dead; The idea is king; Long live painting.

¹² Griffin, J., 2011, Richard Aldrich, in B. Schwabsky, 2011, *Vitamin P2*, London, Phaidon, p. 20.